DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 808 CS 202 669

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TITLE Defining "Folklore" in the Classroom.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, March 25-27, 1976); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Background; Culture; *Folk Culture; Folklore Books; Higher Education; *Humanities Instruction; Legends; Nonformal Education; Student Interests; *Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS *Folklore

ABSTRACT

Folklore, a body of traditional beliefs of a people conveyed orally or by means of custom, is very much alive, involves all people, and is not the study of popular culture. In studying folklore, the principal tasks of the folklorist have been defined as determining definition, classification, source (the folk), origin (who composed folklore), transmission, variation, structure, meaning and function, and use and application. Folklore study has a definite place in the college student's total education, offering a disciplined examination of nonacademic areas of knowledge which interest students, teaching the nature and uses of primary and secondary evidence, and introducing tools for library research. (JM)

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Defining Folklore in the Classroom

Folklore consists of a body of traditional beliefs of a people which are conveyed among its members orally or by means of custom.[1] This formal definition is true enough, but there are so many misconceptions about folklore and its study that it is important to specifically state not only what folklore is, but what it is not before going on to suggest how it can be used in the college composition classroom.

One envisions, for example, a bespectacled college professor making his way by mule back through some Appalachian wilderness--or, in the case of my own Upper Peninsula of Michigan, by snowshoes and dogsled--notebook in one hand, tape recorder in the other, seeking the Holy Grail of Folkloredom: the untold Davey Crockett anecdote, the unrecorded method of building a log cabin, the untaped variant of "Blue-Tailed Fly." It is a glamourous and noble life, as scientist battles the forces of death and senility before all of the Great American Tradition becomes extinct. Or one thinks, when one thinks of folklore, of a vast body of misinformation which has been accumulated by quaint, well-meaning souls at the expense of True Knowledge, which (as we all know) is only found in books.

The fact is that most folklore is true, or (as is the case with family recipes) completely unrelated to any notion of truth or falsehood. That is because, paradoxically, folklore is that information which a people considers so important that it is never written down. In other words, it is not written down because people consider it unlikely that they will forget it. The concern for "vanishing" folklore is not (or should not be) a concern for the end of a means of transmission, but rather because specific lore--stories, methods, songs--are no longer useful or current enough to be continually on the lips of the people they serve. Thus they must be written down or else forgotten. But they are immediately replaced with a new body of lore. Thus folklore as a whole--that is, traditional, oral or customary knowledge--is no more about to vanish than is The New York Times, and is actually a good deal more secure. The world has done, and would continue to do very well without newspapers, thank you, but no society--however sophisticated--has ever existed without this particular means of conveying its knowledge. Although some groups are undeniably more dependent upon oral lore to preserve their knowledge than are others, and the inexpensiveness of today's print media makes writing a relatively easy way to preserve what is not spoken, the fact remains that non-written knowledge is one of the chief sources of information in our culture. Folklore consists of stories, riddles, anecdotes, superstitions, songs, construction methods, cooking methods, accounts of past happenings, crafts, laws, sewing and quilting, and other traditional knowledge ("the lore") which is conveyed in an unwritten manner among members of a group ("the folk.")

And who are the folk? We are. All people find themselves as members of various folk groups, divided and differentiated by speech, education, hobbies, occupation, age, and most obviously, by region and nationality. It is always easier to recognize folklore in other groups than it is in your own: Ukrainians make lovely Easter eggs; Irish tell leprechaun stories; Finns take saunas; cowboys (supposedly) sing to their cattle, and so on. All are doubtless examples of folklore groups. The danger lies, however, in failing to recognize our own, of thinking that because we do not live on an Indian reservation or in a New England

CS 202 669

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fishing village that we are not members of a folk group. Any homogeneous group is "a folk," and this has implications for the college composition teacher, as we shall see. Richard Dorson, in the foreword to the 1972 paperback edition of his classic collection of traditional folklore, Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers, recognizes this: ". . . in my foray into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1946 I crossed the Straits of Mackinac by ferry to enter an uncharted world of folk societies. As I now realize, I could have found the folk anywhere, but at the time I needed a symbolic crossing in my voyage of discovery." [2]

Each region and group has its heroes, its local legends, its customs and traditions. True, an isolated region or group will have developed a more distinctive and easily recognized body of lore, just as it will have a more distinct dialect, but this does not mean that other groups and areas are less rich in lore, just less obviously so. The analogy of folklore to dialects is a useful one. Just as all people, not just those in the South and New Jersey, have a peculiar speech which is distinctive to them and reflects their ethnic, regional, and educational background, so too, do all people possess a body of unwritten lore which also reflects that background. No folklorist would say that an Ohio State freshman has no folklore, just as no linguist would say that that same student "has no accent."

If you learned to make turkey stuffing from your mother's traditional family recipe instead of from a cook book, you have benefited from folklore. If your father taught you a special way to tie a hook on a fishing line that he learned not from a book, but from another fisherman, you have been taught by a folk method. If you ever wondered, while a student waiting in a classroom for a late professor, how long you were supposed to wait for a full professor with a Ph.D.--five, ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes--you have followed the dictates of folk custom. Or, if you have anxiously tried to move your sleeping child's head from his pillow in order to deposit a quarter from the Tooth Fairy, you have been a party to folklore.

It is important, however, to note that we are also swimming in a lot of bogus folklore--"fake lore," Richard Dorson called it [3]--which is made-up folklore, professional creations designed to "pass" for the real stuff. These include inventions like Paul Bunyon, [4] whose exploits are formally taught to school children as examples of our native American heritage, and the pseudo-folk music epidemic of the sixties. Nor is folklore literature based on folk material, such as Joel Chandler Harris' delightful Uncle Remus tales. Interesting though they are, they are the interpretations of a literary artist, and while the folklorist may well value them for the body of material they are based on, he should not be led into believing them the homely creations of a simple, black storyteller of a century ago. Folklore is by definition oral, and true folk texts (the story set down exactly as the informant says it) are filled with the "ums," "ers," and inconsistencies of human speech. Literary efforts of necessity must hone and polish the basic text before it is acceptable for general publication. The artist, moreover, is concerned not with verbatim accuracy, but with what he can do with a motif or tale. (This is the "That's-neat-I've-got-to-find-a-way-to-use-it-somehow" school of writing.)

Nor is folklore specifically the study of popular culture. Popular art, unlike folk culture, usually has an identifiable creator who uses modern mass media technology to produce a product which is intended to sell to large groups of people. While the popular creator may have artistic concerns, he is usually a professional and is attempting to make a living; on the other hand, folklore is not generally

created by a single, known individual, but is made up of a common body of knowledge, and is usually not conveyed for money. (There are exceptions, of course. Many peoples have tale-tellers or bards who are reimbursed for their abilities, but these people are considered to be repositories of community knowledge, rather than individual artists.)

Popular culture and mass media, however, abound in material which has folk sources. In the 1932 Walt Disney film, The Three Little Pigs, for instance, we see the creation by individual artists of a unique artistic creation. Yet this creation was based on many folk elements. Analogues are widely found. "Mary, Martha, and Nancy" are the pigs seeking refuge from the wolf in the Kentucky Mountain version, and their houses are made of "chips and clay, chips and hickory bark, and 'steel and arn.'" [5] Interestingly, though, the film writers combined two originally separate tales, "blowing the house down," and "wolf in sheep's clothing," as well as made obvious analogies of the situation to the Depression. Thus the song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" took on an added significance to an American population with thousands of wolves at the door. Folk material provided the basis; interpretation and adaptation came from the individual artist.

Folklorists are not concerned with determining what actually happened at a specific event which has been relayed by folk methods, either; or, rather, they are concerned with the actual event only insofar as it served as material for folk elaboration and simplification. The historian must determine what really happened during the 1913 miners' strike in Michigan's Copper Country; it is the folklorist who analyzes and classifies the stories that continue to grow out of an event in a region that still is obsessed with the occurances of that year.

Folklore study has evolved over the last century into a genuine science, an established discipline. Brunvand (pp. 10-11) considers nine questions to form the principal tasks of the folklorist; these include determining "definition (what folklore is), classification (what the genres of the folklore are), source (who 'the folk' are), origin (who composed folklore), transmission (how folklore is carried, how fast, and how far), variation (how folklore changes and for what reasons), structure (what the underlying form of folklore is and the relationship of form to content), meaning and function (what folklore means to its carriers and how it serves them), and finally use and application" (the ways in which knowledge of folklore can be extended to other subjects.) Folklorists explore these questions, in the words of one of America's pioneer folklorists, "not by speculation or deduction from some abstract principle agreed upon a priori, but by the inductive method which, in the last analysis, underlies all scientific research, whether historical or natural." [6] To this end, any study of folklore, classroom or otherwise, must make clear the comprehensive nature of the research involved and the necessity for an objective, inquiring outlook.

What can folklore study offer the student? Certainly we should have no intention of transforming him into a junior folklorist--most of us are unqualified to teach him sufficiently, and besides, the pay for electrical engineers is much better. But folklore study does have a place in the total education of the student. In the first place, it offers a disciplined examination of non-academic areas of knowledge which are all around us, and hopefully, a better insight into "the inescapable cultural possession of mankind." [7] Failing these lofty aims, folklore is fun and far more likely to excite student interest than is reading The Red Badge of Courage. I do not mean folklore of the type that analyzes the

Child ballads or studies the colonial method of making brooms--though such studies are certainly important. The fact remains that most freshmen are painfully interested in themselves and have a horrifying need to know that what they are learning is "relevant." By "relevant", most students mean "what I think I want to know." The task for teachers becomes to transform this rather self-satisfied and often intellectually flabby introspection into a truly relevant area: the ability to encounter new information, to deal with it critically, and communicate the resulting knowledge intelligently. Folklore--if one begins with studying immediately accessible "student lore"--is one way of bridging the gap. It is a structured study, but one which is of immediate and personal interest.

What procedures are best in teaching folklore? It all depends on the purpose and scope of the class, whether folklore is to be the entire focus of the course, or simply a unit of it. The instructor is, of course, his own best guide. What he or she is most comfortable with will doubtless prove the best method, but I do believe that there are several points which are important in considering the approach to take. First, as I have already said, it is best to start out by instilling an awareness on the student's part that folklore is all around him. Colleges offer a fountainhead of folk material for the alert. Local legends abound, as in the case of the stone lions that roar when a virgin walks past at the University of Michigan or the statue of the Michigan State Spartan which drops its helmet in the same situation. Hero tales (often comic) attach themselves to the persons of dormatory namesakes, and songs (usually unprintable) are especially interesting. Folktales and anecdotes surround academic life, such as the alleged case of the flunking student who waited to take his own life by leaping from a campus building until he could be sure that the professor who failed him would see him hit the pavement, or the infamous stupidity of big-name athletes. Riddles and jokes are good, as are stories about certain majors.

Second, it is imperative to go beyond simple story-telling in the study of the material--to see, for instance, that there are certain universal characteristics to folk material. In Detroit, with its large Polish population, a joke goes, "What has an I.Q. of 140?" The answer is, "Poland." In Houghton, however, with its large Finnish settlement, the answer is, of course, "Finland." Ideally, the student should go beyond this, and dig into his subject with at least one of Brunvand's nine questions in mind. How, for example, does a specific tale vary among male and female students? What dating customs are outlined to freshmen on their arrival by upperclassmen, and how does this reflect and affect relationships among students?

Third, folklore study provides an excellent opportunity to teach the nature and uses of evidence, both primary and secondary. It is not enough to simply come up with a few stories on one's own or from a few random interviews. An accurate collector must gather material scientifically; he must know his sources, and be constantly on the lookout for new material.

In addition, folklore makes for a good introduction to library research. Students and instructors should certainly become aware of the basic bibliographical tools for folklore research, such as The Motif Index of Folk-Literature and The Type Index.[9] These books are quite helpful in that they list variants and analogues for comparison and illustrate the universality of folk forms, as well as indicating (in the case of the Motif Index, especially) how folklore depends on formula and convention, characteristics which deserve emphasis in a world which accepts its folklore uncritically. Motif E332.3.3.1 ("The Vanishing Hitchhiker"--

a girl's ghost tries to thumb a ride home on the anniversary of her gruesome death) has been solemnly related to me as fact by at least three freshmen as having happened on lonely stretches of road outside three different home towns.

Armed with the basic research tools, a simple understanding of one or more of the general categories of folk study,[10] and a knowledge of the ubiquitous nature of folklore, the student can turn to his family and home town for further subjects for research. In every case where I have suggested or assigned such a topic to a student for a research paper, the topic has been met with great enthusiasm, despite the fact that acceptable research is much more difficult than for the usual paper on V. D. or the decriminalization of marijuana.

Biology majors research animal lore and its effects on man's treatment of such animals as the wolf, snake, and spider. Liberal arts majors investigate folklore and literature. Social science students can deal with the oral history of their town or college. Civil engineers can look at local legends that attach themselves to great bridges like the Golden Gate or the Mackinac. All students can investigate common methods for decorating dorm rooms, songs, how to build snow statues, and school legends. Most of the latter topics are not unusual ones for the freshman composition student. A knowledge of the science of folklore does, however, make these papers more than the "how I spent my summer vacation" kind of exercise, and hopefully expands them into part of a meaningful, disciplined study of the student's own world.

If there ever was any doubt in my mind as to the advisability of teaching folklore to the freshman English student, it vanished the day one student turned in a paper on her Finnish grandmother's stories. "You know," the student said, "I used to just sort of tune her out. Now I wish I'd started listening sooner."

Notes

[1] For an excellent discussion of the nature and definition of folklore, see Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York: Norton, 1968), esp. pp. 1-22; see also Levette J. Davidson, A Guide to American Folklore (Denver: University of Denver, 1951).

[2] Richard M. Dorson, Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula (Cambridge: Harvard, 1952), p. vii.

[3] "Folklore and Fake Lore," American Mercury, 70 (1950), 335-43.

[4] Daniel G. Hoffman, Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1952).

[5] Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore, p. 107.

[6] Alexander H. Krappe, The Science of Folklore (1930; rpt. New York: Norton, 1964), p. 10.

[7] Jan Harold Brunvand, On the Teaching of American Folklore (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 10.

[8] Richard M. Dorson discusses the technique for gathering primary material in "Collecting Oral Folklore in the United States," the introduction to Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964), pp. 1-20.

[9] Stith Thompson, The Motif Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends, 6 vols. (Rev.; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1955-1958), Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, The Types of the Folktale (Rev., Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications, 1961).

[10] Introductory texts for freshmen (and teachers looking for information) are not difficult to obtain. Brunvand's The Study of American Folklore is excellent, and by now pretty standard, and most teachers will find it makes a good backbone to any course. Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1972), is a collection of essays on areas of folklore and fieldwork techniques. More difficult and specialized than Brunvand, it is nevertheless an important book and useful to a teacher, even if it is used for nothing more than its many annotated bibliographies and Dorson's inclusive introduction. There is also Davidson's Guide to American Folklore and Dorson's American Folklore (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), to which Buying the Wind is the companion anthology. Krappe's The Science of Folklore is an outdated, but classic and still useful introduction to European folklore. Kenneth S. Goldstein's A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964) is helpful. In addition, Brunvand has an extremely useful bibliography on teaching folklore to undergraduates in On the Teaching of American Folklore.